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ABSTRACT

Student engagement, a crucial school restructuring issue for the 1990s, comprises interventions that channel the need for competence toward academic success, offer students increased access to extrinsic rewards, cultivate study of intrinsically interesting and invaluable material, provide consistent social support, and maximize student ownership of learning. This paper describes how teachers and students at the School Without Walls (SWW) in Rochester, New York, cooperate to maximize student engagement by identifying courses, designing basic essential questions as course frameworks, and selecting appropriate activities as course content. Teachers and students negotiate their curricula through various stages of curriculum development. Five issues related to student engagement are examined: (1) situated cognition as an instructional dimension of student engagement; (2) social norms as obstructions to student engagement; (3) student responsibility and choice; (4) the "hidden curriculum" as a social-political issue; and (5) student-centered curricula in restructured schools. SWW has both content and extended interdisciplinary courses. The curriculum-building and personalization process is described in detail, as are eight classroom strategies, coordination with New York State requirements, and program benefits. (Contains 19 references.) (MLH)

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Giving Voice and Empowerment to
Student Engagement: A School-based
Interactive Curriculum

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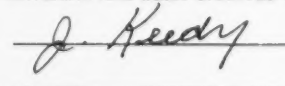
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John Goodlad (1984) in his classic study of schooling in the 1980s observed that classrooms across the country were remarkably similar. In high schools, for instance, teacher talk accounted for 90 percent of classroom time. Students took notes and answered short, factually-based teacher designed questions. Our classrooms are not intellectually stimulating. Students are empty vessels to be filled with teacher-dispensed information designed for fifty-minute assembly-line "stops" and dissected for multiple-choice tests. Students are not active learning partners with teachers. A crucial issue in school restructuring for the 1990s is that of student engagement in the learning process.

Student Engagement and an Interactive Curriculum

Student engagement, according to Newmann (1989), comprises interventions which: 1) channel the need for competence toward success in academic work; 2) offer students increased access to extrinsic rewards; 3) cultivate study of intrinsically interesting and invaluable material; 4) provide consistent social support; and 5) maximize student ownership of learning.

In this paper we will describe how teachers and students at the School Without Walls (SWW) in Rochester, New York, maximize student engagement. Teachers and students both participate in identifying courses, designing basic essential questions as course frameworks, and selecting appropriate activities as course content. We use the term "interactive" because teachers and students together negotiate their curricula through various stages of curriculum development. SWW's interactive curriculum addresses at least two of Newmann's criteria (intrinsic student interest and student ownership of learning) because their students are given both choice and responsibility in the annual curriculum design.

We first will highlight several practical dimensions on the current school reform agenda related to student engagement. These dimensions provide a rationale for SSW's interactive curriculum. Second, we will describe both the interactive curriculum-building annual procedure and some classroom processes that help personalize the curriculum for students. Third, we address the problem of how SSW meets the state education agency (SEA) curriculum requirements.

School Reform Trends and Student Engagement

In this section we will examine five issues related to student engagement: 1) situated cognition as an instructional dimension of student engagement; 2) social norms as obstructions to student engagement; 3) student responsibility and choice; 4) the "hidden curriculum" as a political issue; and 5) curricula in restructuring schools.

Situated cognition.

According to this view on learning, all knowledge is similar to language and cannot be separated from the situation or context in which knowledge is produced. Learning cannot be decontextualized (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Situated cognition has several implications for how students learn. One, skills are not broken down into discrete, isolated subskills without a context (readings, situations, community research). Two, learning opportunities are maximized when students can relate their prior knowledge to new material. Three, effective teachers often may act as cultural brokers as they relate material to students' cultural norms.

Social Norms as Obstructions to Student Disengagement

According to Hampel (1986) a major problem in restructuring is eliminating the pervasive student disengagement or conspiracy of convenience (Sizer, 1984). Students and teachers often observe an informal covenant: Students will not bother

teachers (i.e., cause classroom problems) provided teachers do not bother them. This social norm can function as a complex avoidance of rigorous, demanding academic inquiry (Sedlack, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986). Student motivation appears to be a major key in classroom restructuring. How do we give students responsibility for their learning so that students become self-directed learners with the critical thinking skills necessary in the Information Age? Teachers need to change their roles from dispenser of information to facilitator and coach.

Student Choice and Responsibility

Glasser (1990) uses the metaphor of "student as worker". The more the students perceive that assigned work satisfies their needs, the more likely they will do the work. Students and teachers together decide what to learn and how that learning will be evaluated. The student as worker process, according to Glasser, changes our boss-managed adversarial school norms. Newmann (1989) advocates that students "own their work". Students should have influence on the conception, execution, and evaluation of the work itself.

Ericson and Ellett (1990), however, approach schooling from another perspective. Teachers and schools as institutions have been solely held accountable for student learning. Students also should be held accountable for their failure to use the opportunities provided for them (Walberg cited by Ericson & Ellett). Ultimately, schools may be organized ("breaking the mold") to maximize both student choice and responsibility.

The "Hidden Curricula" as a Social-political Issue.

Social critics of public education, such as Paulo Freire (1970), Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and David Purpel (1989) claim that public education is an oppressive cog in a machinery designed to sort out the workers from managers and owners of

the production. Tracking, ability grouping, and centralized, curricula core mandated by SEAs preclude minorities, women, and ethnic groups from deriving benefit from curricula. These critics and others ask challenging questions. What are we now teaching? What are its perspectives and who benefits? Who is excluded because curricula content deals with perspectives other than their own? As Purpel observes, too much of schooling involves students seeking answers to questions they do not understand. Why are students not asking the questions? Teachers and students should swap roles of who asks and who answers questions.

Curricula in Restructuring Schools

In the Coalition of Essential Schools students deal in depth with a few major concepts or issues instead of coverage of textbook. A course might be built around three broad questions such as the nature of power and how it is used in the United States (Sizer, 1986). In the Foxfire experience work flows from the student interest or concern; curriculum is considered an approach, not a recipe, and consists of investigation and composition on meaning of the outside world (Wigginton, 1989). In the League of Professional Schools students seek, apply concepts, and explore with an emphasis on living, learning experiences.

Summary

Situated cognition, traditional social norms and teacher-student role change, student responsibility and choice, the hidden curriculum and the emerging curriculum in restructuring schools can be viewed as catalysts supporting the need for student engagement. In traditional classrooms teachers are the workers as they dispense information aligned to state-core curriculum to compliant, often passive students. In classrooms of the future teachers will help students do the work (the "knowledge workers"). As demonstrated below, SWW's annual curriculum

development procedure and classroom instructional processes both maximize student engagement and encourage students to be the knowledge workers.

Description of the Interactive Curriculum and Curriculum Personalization Processes

SWW has two sets of courses: one and one-and-a-half hour content courses with an academic focus (e.g., foreign language, mathematics, remedial courses); and "extended courses" (broad, interdisciplinary courses meeting for two and half hours daily). The interactive curriculum is emphasized in the extended courses. The seven steps were designed partly on the work of Leland Howe (1975):

The Curriculum Building Procedure

1. In May of each year each teacher/advisor generates/ brainstorms answers with their students to these two questions:
 - A. Given complete freedom to explore and learn, what do you think that most teenagers would want to learn about?
 - B. What are the issues and concerns you think our citizens need teenagers to learn?
2. Each class generates their lists and then in small groups reach consensus on which five ideas for each question are most important. Teachers may vary on the process used to generate and reach priorities but generally their methods are similar.
3. All data are brought to staff meetings where they are posted, shared and analyzed for patterns, commonalities and possibilities for synthesis. Staff members are given a week to consider possible courses and share ideas with one another and students. They report back to the next staff meeting with two or three possible ideas for classes and share them with staff. The staff reviews the ideas and shares ideas for

enriching the courses. Each staff member selects an issue, with staff consensus, that they will offer as an extended, multi-disciplinary class. A major criteria they use for agreeing on courses is whether it fits into the needs that students initially generated. The ideas that they do not use for extended classes but were considered valuable are used by staff to develop other classes.

4. Staff members then write short class descriptions for their courses that are discussed and modified at the next staff meeting.

5. Course descriptions for extended classes are then sent home to every new and returning student for the next school year. Students are asked to read, review with parents and then make three rank-ordered choices, knowing that their extended class teacher will also be their academic advisor for the school year.

6. In late June, students are notified of their extended class assignment and required to meet with their teacher for a 2 hour curriculum development process. This process allows for several things to happen:

- A. Class bonding begins
- B. Students develop ownership, excitement and enthusiasm for the course.
- C. Teachers leave for the summer with some idea of what materials to gather and develop during the summer. Some students do this too!

7. When students return in September, they review their June minutes as a class and may modify them as well. The teacher, with student input, will make a decision on what aspect of the brainstormed data must be dealt with first.

Depending on student motivation and other "spin-off" issues, the course may move in directions, not predicted by the teacher or class members. THE KEY IS THAT WHATEVER IS PURSUED BY THE CLASS IS DRIVEN BY THE GOALS AND SKILLS OUTLINED IN THE RESPECTIVE GOAL STATEMENTS AND STUDENT

EVALUATION FORM. Hence, though content is important, the underlying emphasis is on process skills. The SWW Goals and Skills on the Student Evaluation Form are used by teachers as a frame of reference (curricular alignment) for designing their curriculum.

Seven strategies are used to help students "personalize" the curriculum. Students are encouraged to be involved actively in operationalizing the curriculum in the classrooms: What activities can teachers and students use to accomplish (or find meaning) to the essential issues identified during the above annual, curriculum building procedure?

The Seven Classroom Strategies

1) developing a flow chart: listing all issues, problems, ideas, and subtopics relating to the chosen course themes. Teachers and students begin to see the interdisciplinary relationships of the themes to other subjects and the standard curriculum.

2) constructing a question census: specific lists of questions are drawn up for each theme with a balance among factual, conceptual, and value orientations.

3) identifying available resources for the unit: large newsprint sheets are used to list readings, audio-visual materials, field trips, speakers, manipulative devices.

4) developing activities from the question census: teachers and students select questions from the census which they are particularly interested in. Activities then are linked to these questions.

5) proposing the unit: teachers and/or students (depending upon the student's level) determine this unit of study, for instance by using a grid with course objectives on the vertical and appropriate activities on the vertical.

6) curriculum revisions: the grids are used to ensure that various types of

objectives (e.g., value, cognitive skill) are well represented.

7) sequencing the unit: teachers, often with the help of students, plan the orders of activities for each objective.

8) evaluation of objectives: how can teachers and students determine if appropriate student learning has occurred?

Readers may be skeptical about the chances of implementing such a curriculum design in their schools because of SEA regulations. How SWW personnel deal with this problem is explained below.

SWW as a Player with the Local and State Agencies

According to New York State Regents and the Rochester City School District policies, all graduates must have 4 units of English and Social Studies, 3 of Math, 2 of Science, 1 unit of Health, 2 of Phys. Ed. and the remainder in electives for a total of 20.5 credits for graduation. (Actually the city goes beyond State requirements by sanctioning an extra credit in math and an extra credit in Science. New York State requires 18.5 credits for graduation.)

The SEA strongly suggests but does not require a uniform curricula core. Students must pass the minimal Regents Competency Tests (RCT) in reading, writing, math, Global Studies, American History and Science or pass the more rigorous Regents Exams. According to SEA policy, each course must have a minimum of 180 minutes per week to equal a Carnegie Unit of credit. It does not require five classes in each subject per week. Given these circumstances, SWW offers courses that focus on higher level thinking skills and process-oriented learning, but infuse enough content and state-required skills to allow kids to pass the RCTs. For those kids who need remedial help in reading, writing and math,

required courses are assigned. Teachers regularly offer Word Cultures and American Studies elective courses that students in danger of failing an RCT (or have already failed) are counseled into by their advisors. (Other interested students also can enroll in these courses.)

The last contextual factor in New York State encouraging SWW to continue their curriculum procedure and strategies is the NYS Commissioner of Education, Dr. Tom Sobel. He is encouraging school districts to experiment with student-centered reform. So, the message clearly reaches those City School administrators and School Board members. SWW is fortunate enough to have a Superintendent, a majority of Board members, and a teacher's union president who agree with Sobel and support School Without Walls.

Additionally, the "Schools of Choice" system in Rochester is dependent to some degree on viable alternatives for students. Students and parents receive detailed written information and orientations on what makes SWW different. So, those people who choose SWW, generally tend to be "smart shoppers" who are aware of what they've bought.

Lastly, the track record speaks for itself.

- 80% of SWW graduates go on to college, 90% of whom get their first choice.
- 90% of the kids attend school daily
- Few, if any, students are suspended
- Students do pass the RCTs and do as well or better than comparable groups on the SATs
- The alumni praise the education they received.

Summary: Maximizing Student Engagement

In this interactive curriculum building procedure and classrooms strategies, both teachers and students are players in meeting mutual needs. SWW's interactive curriculum is a workable strategy for institutionalizing student involvement, encouraging student ownership of both what courses are offered (curriculum building procedure) and how essential questions or themes are studied (classroom strategies). SWW staff members believe that student involvement and ownership are key pieces in maximizing student engagement. The traditional "informal covenant" (Parish & Eubanks, 1987; Cusick, 1983; Sedlak et al., 1986) existing between teachers and students is replaced with students sharing the responsibility for their learning.

At SWW students and teachers decide what activities can be used to meet the class objectives. Teachers and students are team members not adversaries. With the SWW curriculum process there is an emphasis on learning how to learn, since courses are based on a few fundamental questions--not on behavioral objectives. Such a curriculum model may be particularly workable in many urban high schools because it relates to the metaphor "teacher as broker in bridging the home and school cultures" (Dillon, 1990).

Conclusion

Murphy (1990) contended that school restructuring efforts were not focused on the essential core technology of classroom learning and teaching. According to Murphy we need to "backward map" and identify first what and how students should learn. The interactive curriculum may be one key piece in the teaching and learning puzzle.

What are some questions and issues related to interactive curriculum and school restructuring? Demographic data may be some cause for alarm. According to Cole (1988) nearly 75% of school districts have less than 2500 inhabitants. Are these smaller, and largely rural districts in the national dissemination pipelines? What are their representations at national conferences and within national reform initiatives like the Coalition of Essential Schools? How are we setting policy and disseminating information that encourages these districts to consider, adapt, and implement key restructuring elements like interactive curriculum?

How many schools are using curriculum models in which students and teachers make major learning decisions? Would the SWW and similar models not be catalysts for empowering schools as communities of learners? Would interactive models help address the problem of accessibility of knowledge that social critics, such as Purpel claim is depriving educationally disadvantaged students of genuine equal opportunity? With the inner-city schools fighting for their existence, how do we get the message out to teachers and students searching for empowerment and voice? Urban school cultures are particularly impervious to changing institutional norms from a bureaucratic to a participative culture in which all student needs for citizenship in the twenty-first century are met (Parish, Eubanks, Aquila, & Walker, 1989). How can we reorganize schooling so that our students become critical thinkers, participating citizens in democratic processes, and productive contributors to our economy?

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